

Old Reception Unit

This 85-bed building at Montana State Prison was originally used as a license plate factory. Later it was converted to a reception unit to assess, process and orient new inmates as they arrived at the prison. It also served as the maximum-security unit until the new “max” was erected. For a time following the 1991 riot in the maximum-security building, the unit housed inmates who had been in max until it was severely damaged in the riot. After that, it reverted to a reception unit until the opening of a new facility in May 2004.

The 2005 Legislature authorized the department to use the building as a “revocation center,” which would handle those who violate conditions of their parole instead of returning them to prison for longer periods.

However, the prison was unable to hire correctional officers to staff the unit, just as it has been unable to hire officers to fill vacant posts elsewhere at the prison. The department was approached in late summer by Community, Counseling and Correctional Services Inc. of Butte to establish a revocation center in a mothballed building at Warm Springs. The nonprofit company assured corrections officials it would be able to hire the 34 staff needed for the facility and ended up with 300-400 job applicants.

The department agreed to the proposal, and the program is expected to be operating by early December.

Meanwhile, the old reception unit was refurbished, but remains empty because the prison still cannot hire the officers needed. Prison officials have suggested that, with the Warm Springs project under way, plans to use the old reception unit building as a revocation center be formally dropped and, if the staff can be hired, fill the building with some of about 120 inmates who are forced to live on the high-security side of the prison only because the low-security side has no room for them now.

These inmates, by virtue of their good behavior, deserve to be housed apart from the high-security inmates. But they are denied this privilege solely because the prison lacks low-side beds. This circumstance can create frustration and anger among those inmates because a system that helps maintain security and order within the prison does not work for them.

The department would like a recommendation from the council on what should be done with the old reception unit.